When digital content creators replace real-world confidants

The parasocial TRAP

VIRGINIA ROBERTSON

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Introduction

We used to owe each other something. Not love necessarily, that was always too heavy a word for the small, stubborn currency of village life. But inconvenience. The low-grade, daily friction of sharing air with people we had not chosen. A neighbour's late-night argument. The butcher's unsolicited opinion on the weather. A cousin's tedious story, told for the fourth time.

That friction, it turns out, was a muscle. And we have let it atrophy.

Sometime between the death of the town square and the birth of the infinite scroll, we solved the wrong problem. We learned to eliminate discomfort, the awkward pause, the cancelled coffee date, the

risk of being seen and rejected, only to discover that a life without friction is also a life without weight. We now pay strangers to simulate care via subscription platforms, outbidding ourselves for parasocial warmth while real friendships sit unanswered on read receipts. We mourn celebrities with a ferocity we cannot muster for distant relatives, because mediated grief demands nothing of us, no awkward phone call, no casserole to deliver, no witnessing of another's raw, uncontainable pain.

The algorithms noticed our loneliness before we did. They fed it, shaped it, turned it into a revenue stream. Chatbots now listen without judgment, which is to say, without the terrifying, necessary possibility that they might walk away. Influencers weaponise their trauma for engagement, teaching us to confess to crowds rather than confide in one person. We have built hierarchies of victimhood inside digital support groups, where recovery becomes disincentivised because wellness would mean losing our place in the attention economy. And for the most fragile among us, fictional characters have become safer attachment figures than any living human, because a ship never ghosts you, and a fanfiction archive never wakes up in a bad mood.

This is not a moral failure. It is a structural one. We have redesigned connection as a transaction, vulnerability as a performance, and intimacy as a product you can subscribe to. The result is a self that is not evil, not broken, but hollowed – shaped perfectly to the contours of a screen, fluent in monologue and terrified of dialogue.

This book is about that hollowness. And about whether, from its inside, we might still hear the faint, inconvenient sound of another person breathing.

The loneliness economy

There was a time when loneliness arrived quietly. It lived in widows' parlours and long country roads, in letters that took weeks to arrive and in winters that stretched too far. Today, loneliness has a user interface. It sends notifications. It arrives in 4K resolution with soft lighting, direct messaging tiers and monthly subscription packages. It tells us we are seen, remembered, desired. For £9.99 a month, someone will say our name out loud.

Modern capitalism has discovered something profoundly lucrative: emotional absence can be monetised. Subscription platforms have transformed inti-

macy into infrastructure. What began as a revolution in creator independence, a supposedly democratic way for artists, influencers, models and performers to earn directly from audiences, has evolved into something more psychologically complex. We are no longer merely buying content. Increasingly, we are purchasing the sensation of closeness itself.

The new economy does not simply sell products. It sells simulated belonging. And perhaps the most unsettling part is not that people are paying strangers to care about them. It is that, for many, strangers have become more emotionally available than real life.

For centuries, wealth was measured materially. Land. Jewellery. Property. Then came the digital age, where convenience became king. Now, the ultimate luxury is attention.

Not general attention, personalised attention. A creator replying "missed you" to a subscriber can generate more emotional impact than a conversation with an actual colleague. A voice note from an influencer can feel more intimate than a family dinner. Followers learn creators' coffee orders, pets' names, break-up histories and moods with a familiarity once reserved for neighbours and relatives.

These relationships are known as parasocial: one-sided emotional bonds formed with media personalities who remain largely unaware of the individual audience member. Yet the word "parasocial" feels increasingly outdated because modern platforms blur the distinction between performance and reciprocity. Subscribers can now receive direct messages, custom content, live interactions and personalised acknowledgements. The illusion of mutual care has become technologically sophisticated.

The result is a strange emotional middle ground. The connection is real enough to affect the nervous system but controlled enough to avoid the unpredictability of genuine relationships.

Real friendships require compromise, patience and vulnerability. Subscription intimacy requires only recurring billing.

It is tempting to blame smartphones for the loneliness economy, but the groundwork was laid much earlier. In the 19th century, social life was physically embedded into daily existence. Town squares, markets, public houses, churches and communal streets functioned as accidental social infrastructure. Human interaction was unavoidable. People encountered neighbours while buying bread, collecting

water or walking through shared civic spaces. Community was not always warm or idyllic, but it was structurally present.

Industrialisation began shifting this arrangement. Urban life became faster, denser and more transactional. Still, cities retained a kind of social friction. , crowded cafés, local grocers, corner shops and public transport ensured regular contact between strangers.

The more dramatic transformation arrived in the mid-20th century with suburbanisation. Post-war suburbia promised privacy, safety and individual prosperity. Families moved into detached homes separated by fences, gardens and driveways. Shopping migrated from bustling town centres to enclosed malls surrounded by car parks. The automobile replaced the pavement. Convenience replaced proximity.

Architecturally, society began designing out spontaneous interaction. The suburban mall is often remembered nostalgically, but it represented a profound psychological shift. Public life became increasingly consumer-driven. One no longer gathered in communal spaces simply to exist alongside others; one gathered to purchase. Social activity became tethered to spending.

Connection quietly transformed into transaction. The logic eventually expanded everywhere. Cafés became temporary offices. Gyms became identity markers. Dating became app-based shopping. Even self-expression turned into branding. We learned to approach human experience through a marketplace lens long before influencers arrived. Subscription platforms merely perfected the model.

Influencer culture depends upon collapsing the distance between celebrity and audience. Traditional fame relied on mystique; digital fame thrives on accessibility. The modern creator is expected to feel emotionally reachable.

Bedrooms replace studios. Tears are livestreamed. Breakdowns become content arcs. Audiences are invited into routines once considered deeply private: skincare rituals, therapy updates, grocery shopping, arguments, illness, grief.

The performance is not necessarily fake. That is what makes it powerful. Many creators genuinely share aspects of themselves. Many subscribers genuinely care. Yet once emotional openness becomes monetised, authenticity itself becomes economically incentivised. Vulnerability becomes labour.

A creator who appears emotionally intimate often earns more than one who remains distant. Subscribers are not simply supporting content production; they are rewarding emotional availability.

This changes the psychology of both sides. Creators become trapped in perpetual accessibility, pressured to maintain closeness at scale. Subscribers begin confusing emotional responsiveness with relationship itself. The line between audience and companion dissolves.

And unlike traditional friendships, these dynamics are frictionless. Real people disappoint us. Friends forget birthdays. Partners become distracted. Human beings are inconsistent. Digital intimacy, by contrast, is curated. It arrives carefully filtered, algorithmically timed and emotionally optimised. It offers the comforting illusion that connection can exist without rejection.

One reason parasocial relationships flourish is because modern friendship has become surprisingly difficult to maintain.

Contemporary adulthood is structurally hostile to sustained social connection. Work dominates time. Housing costs scatter communities. People relocate

constantly for employment. Flexible labour means unstable schedules. Social media creates the appearance of constant interaction while reducing meaningful presence.

Friendship now requires logistical planning once reserved for diplomatic negotiations. Weeks pass. Messages remain unanswered. People become emotionally depleted. Everyone claims to be "so busy", often truthfully.

Against this backdrop, parasocial intimacy offers something seductively manageable. It asks little emotionally while providing reliable stimulation. A creator is always available on demand. There is no need to negotiate plans, navigate awkward silences or endure reciprocal responsibility. Consumer capitalism has always preferred isolated individuals because isolated people buy more solutions. Lonely people purchase companionship. Anxious people purchase reassurance. Disconnected people purchase visibility.

The marketplace excels at monetising unmet emotional needs because markets cannot solve loneliness collectively, only temporarily soothe it individually.

There is also a distinctly gendered dimension to the loneliness economy. Women have historically been expected to perform emotional labour: listening, comforting, soothing, remembering birthdays, managing feelings. Digital platforms have transformed these traditionally invisible expectations into monetisable services.

Many female creators now operate as hybrid entertainers, therapists, confidantes and fantasy companions simultaneously. Subscribers are often not purchasing explicit material alone; they are purchasing emotional recognition.

A custom message saying "I'm proud of you" can carry astonishing weight in a society where many men, in particular, experience profound emotional isolation.

This reveals something uncomfortable about modern masculinity. Large numbers of men appear more comfortable paying for controlled intimacy than risking emotional vulnerability in reciprocal relationships. It is not difficult to see why. Patriarchal culture often discourages emotional openness between men while simultaneously making heterosexual intimacy the primary acceptable outlet for tenderness.

The result is a population emotionally undernourished and commercially exploitable. Subscription intimacy becomes less about desire and more about permission: permission to feel noticed, wanted or emotionally safe.

Technology companies frequently describe their platforms using the language of community. But communities are not scalable in the way corporations require. Communities involve obligation. Algorithms optimise engagement.

Those are not the same thing. The loneliness economy thrives because digital systems are extraordinarily effective at mimicking the psychological cues of human attachment. Notifications imitate anticipation. Direct messages imitate closeness. Livestreams imitate presence. Recommendation systems create the feeling of personal understanding.

But algorithms do not care whether users become fulfilled. They care whether users remain engaged. A fulfilled person is less profitable than a perpetually yearning one.

This is why platforms reward emotional dependency without resolving emotional deprivation. The

ideal consumer remains slightly lonely, slightly insecure and endlessly scrolling for relief.

Perhaps the tragedy is not that people seek comfort online. Human beings have always pursued connection through whatever mediums existed, letters, radio, cinema, television. The deeper tragedy is that many physical spaces for ordinary social belonging have eroded entirely.

Libraries close.
Community centres disappear.
Local pubs struggle.
Religious participation declines.
Public benches become hostile architecture.
High streets empty into delivery apps and warehouse logistics.

Meanwhile, loneliness is medicalised as an individual pathology rather than recognised as a structural condition.

We speak endlessly about self-care while neglecting collective care. The answer to loneliness cannot simply be "log off". For many people, digital intimacy fills genuine emotional voids. Online communities can save lives. Creators often provide comfort,

representation and solidarity unavailable elsewhere.

But we should still ask why so many people increasingly experience authentic emotional recognition primarily through monetised platforms. What does it say about society when affection feels more accessible through subscription than through neighbourhood?

The next phase of the loneliness economy is already emerging. Artificial intelligence companions, emotionally responsive chatbots and virtual partners promise infinitely customised intimacy without human unpredictability. The future market will not merely monetise parasocial relationships with real people; it will industrialise synthetic companionship itself.

And many consumers will embrace it not because they are foolish, but because exhaustion makes simulation appealing.

Real relationships are demanding.
Communities are messy.
Love is inconvenient.

Yet the very difficulty of human connection is what gives it meaning. Friendship matters precisely be-

cause it cannot be algorithmically guaranteed. Care matters because it involves sacrifice rather than subscription.

A society that outsources intimacy to platforms risks forgetting that relationships are not products to consume but practices to sustain.

The loneliness economy did not appear overnight. It was built gradually through architecture, economics, technology and cultural individualism. We designed cities around cars instead of people. We privatised public life. We replaced civic belonging with consumer identity. Eventually, emotional life itself entered the marketplace.

Now we live with the consequences: millions of people surrounded by content, followers and constant communication, yet profoundly unsure whether anyone would notice if they disappeared offline tomorrow. In the end, perhaps the saddest truth is not that strangers pretend to care. It is that increasingly, pretending feels close enough.

How social media killed casual, low-stakes conflict

There was once a kind of social friction so ordinary that nobody bothered to name it. It lived in village squares, cramped buses, church halls, post offices and school gates. It appeared in the strained smile exchanged with the neighbour who complained too much, the shopkeeper with questionable politics, the cousin who monopolised Christmas dinner with unbearable opinions about absolutely everything. For most of human history, social life was not curated. It was endured.

And strangely enough, that endurance may have been one of civilisation's most important emotional technologies. Today, we speak endlessly about connection while quietly engineering lives almost entire-

ly free from inconvenient people. We mute, unfollow, block, restrict, archive and disappear. Algorithms study our tastes with forensic precision, constructing digital environments that flatter our instincts and protect us from discomfort. We no longer need to tolerate the bore at the pub or the officious neighbour across the lane because our social worlds have become increasingly voluntary. If someone irritates us, we simply erase them from view.

The result is not peace. It is fragility. Social media promised liberation from the exhausting compromises of communal life. Instead, it has hollowed out our capacity to survive ordinary disagreement. We have become psychologically overprotected, emotionally brittle and increasingly incapable of handling the mild social abrasions that once formed the background noise of everyday existence.

The ghost haunting modern life is not loneliness alone. It is the disappearance of low-stakes conflict.

Pre-industrial villages were not idyllic havens of harmony. They were pressure cookers. People lived packed together in conditions where privacy barely existed and personal incompatibilities could not be escaped. The baker might be pompous. The blacksmith could be cruel. Your cousin's husband might be

intolerable. Yet everyone still had to attend the same weddings, funerals, harvest festivals and markets.

The social world was stubbornly shared. This is precisely why older literature feels so crowded with personality. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, every traveller irritates someone. Vanity collides with piety. Crudeness rubs against refinement. Nobody gets to curate the group chat. The pilgrims continue travelling together because they must.

For centuries, social survival depended less on finding your people than on learning how to coexist with people who were emphatically not your people.

There was wisdom hidden in that inconvenience. You learned restraint because storming away was rarely an option. You learned diplomacy because tomorrow you would still need the butcher to cut your meat and the neighbour to help retrieve your escaped sheep. You learned emotional proportion because not every irritation justified exile. Sometimes the village idiot remained the village idiot for forty years, and life simply carried on around him.

Modern culture often mistakes this endurance for repression. But endurance and repression are not the same thing. One silences emotion; the other contex-

tualises it. Not every social injury deserves catastrophe.

The genius of social media lies in its ability to transform preference into infrastructure. Every click, pause, like and share teaches platforms what kind of people we enjoy and what kind we reject. Slowly, invisibly, our worlds narrow. The feed becomes less a public square and more a psychological mirror. We encounter people who speak our language, confirm our worldview, share our aesthetics and reinforce our assumptions.

This feels comforting because it is designed to feel comforting. But the human nervous system was not built for perpetual affirmation. It was built for adaptation. Historically, emotional resilience developed through constant exposure to manageable social disappointment: being misunderstood at dinner, ignored at gatherings, mildly embarrassed in public, forced to cooperate with disagreeable personalities. These experiences were irritating but survivable. They acted as tiny stressors that strengthened our ability to regulate emotion.

Now, many people experience social discomfort less as an ordinary part of life and more as a violation

of identity. The consequences are everywhere. Minor criticism becomes "toxicity". Awkward conversations are treated as emotional danger. Disagreement feels existential. A delayed reply can trigger spirals of humiliation once reserved for genuine social exclusion.

We are becoming exquisitely sensitive to rejection precisely because we encounter less of it in ordinary life. And when rejection finally arrives, at work, in dating, in friendship, in family dynamics, it lands with the force of catastrophe because the emotional calluses never formed.

The old village demanded compromise not because people were morally superior, but because escape was difficult. You could not simply rebuild your entire social identity overnight. If you embarrassed yourself publicly, the memory lingered. If you argued with someone, reconciliation often became necessary because your lives remained structurally entangled.

This produced something modern life increasingly avoids: accountability through proximity. Today, social mobility has become emotional mobility. You can abandon entire social ecosystems with astonishing speed. New friendship groups form online overnight. Dating apps create the illusion of infinite romantic alternatives. Workplace grievances are aired

to strangers rather than resolved internally. Entire identities can be reconstructed with a username and a soft launch.

Freedom has expanded. Tolerance has contracted. There is a peculiar irony here. We celebrate individuality more than any generation before us, yet many people seem less capable of surviving the fact that others may dislike them. The modern self is simultaneously inflated and delicate: deeply invested in personal authenticity while requiring near-constant validation from invisible audiences. The village, by contrast, cared far less about whether you felt fully seen. It cared whether you showed up.

One of the most damaging consequences of digital life is not conflict itself, but permanence. In physical communities, many conflicts dissolved naturally through repetition and routine. You argued with someone at the market, then saw them three days later at a christening, then again at the pub. Life kept forcing re-entry. Social repair happened accidentally.

Online, conflict calcifies. Algorithms reward outrage because outrage sustains engagement. Social media freezes people inside their worst moments, preserving humiliation indefinitely. There is little room for the small, unremarkable interactions

through which human beings usually soften towards one another.

Instead, we encounter each other as declarations. Opinion replaces familiarity. This is why online discourse often feels strangely medieval despite its technological sophistication. People are flattened into moral archetypes: villain, victim, ally, traitor. Nuance disappears because nuance thrives through ongoing contact, not curated performance.

In real villages, people were rarely reducible to one thing because you saw them constantly in contradictory contexts. The rude man at church might also rescue your child from a river. The gossiping woman might bring soup when your mother dies. Human beings remained inconveniently multidimensional. Social media strips away these contradictions and replaces them with identity shorthand. We no longer know how to live beside complexity. We only know how to sort it.

Perhaps the most seductive fantasy sold by modern culture is the idea that healthy relationships should feel frictionless. Friendships must be affirming. Romantic partners must intuitively understand every emotional need. Colleagues should share our values. Family members must become emotionally literate.

Communities should feel safe, seamless and validating at all times.

Yet historically, community was not built on compatibility. It was built on interdependence. Those are radically different things. Interdependence forces patience because people need one another despite irritation. Compatibility, by contrast, encourages disposability. Once relationships become primarily vehicles for personal fulfilment, tolerance naturally declines. Why endure discomfort when another perfectly aligned social option is only a swipe away?

But humans are not infinitely customisable creatures. Every real relationship eventually involves boredom, misunderstanding, asymmetry and disappointment.

Without practice tolerating these low-level tensions, people begin treating ordinary relational strain as evidence that something is fundamentally wrong. The result is a culture simultaneously obsessed with connection and increasingly incapable of sustaining it.

There is a reason emotionally resilient people often possess a certain relaxed attitude towards social

awkwardness. They have learned, usually through repeated exposure, that discomfort is survivable.

Not every slight requires confrontation.
Not every disagreement signals abuse.
Not every incompatibility demands estrangement.

The village taught this accidentally. It trained people to metabolise annoyance without collapsing into crisis. It encouraged perspective because everyone had witnessed countless petty dramas rise and fade into irrelevance. Social life was understood as messy, repetitive and imperfect.

Now, many people experience social discomfort in highly individualised ways, detached from communal context. The self becomes the centre of interpretation. Every interaction feels psychologically loaded because there are fewer shared rituals diluting emotional intensity.

Ironically, this makes modern social life both hyper-visible and profoundly lonely. We know more about one another's opinions than ever before while possessing fewer mechanisms for enduring ordinary human difference.

None of this means the past was better. Villages could be suffocating, cruel and oppressive. So-

cial conformity often came at enormous personal cost, particularly for women, outsiders and anyone deemed unconventional.

The solution is not nostalgia. But perhaps there is something worth recovering from the social architecture we abandoned. Not the surveillance. Not the rigidity. Not the lack of freedom. Rather, the understanding that community requires tolerance for imperfection.

Real social strength does not come from avoiding friction entirely. It comes from surviving manageable amounts of it repeatedly until the nervous system stops interpreting every disagreement as existential threat.

Perhaps maturity is simply this: learning that coexistence matters more than constant emotional comfort. Because the truth is deeply unfashionable and almost embarrassingly ordinary.

Most human relationships are not optimised experiences. Most communities contain irritating people. Most social interactions involve compromise. And most of civilisation has depended upon our ability to endure this without imploding.

The village is gone now, replaced by feeds that learn our preferences faster than we understand them ourselves. Yet somewhere beneath the algorithms, beneath the endless curation and self-protection, the old human requirement remains unchanged. We still need one another. Even the people we would never choose.

Performance grief

When a celebrity dies now, the internet behaves as though the atmosphere itself has shifted. Timelines slow. Old interviews resurface like relics. Lyrics become scripture. Photographs turn sepia in collective memory within minutes. Strangers write "I'm devastated" beneath news alerts between supermarket runs and office meetings. There are tribute videos, digital candle emojis, grainy clips from award ceremonies, essays on influence, confessionals from people who never met the deceased yet insist, often sincerely, that they "shaped my life".

And perhaps they did. But it is worth asking why so many of us can sob over the death of a singer we never encountered while struggling to call an elderly aunt after a funeral. Why a public figure's passing can flatten us emotionally, yet a colleague's grief leaves us awkward, evasive, uncertain what to say. Why parasocial mourning feels immediate and expansive, while real-life grief often feels inconvenient, demanding, frighteningly practical.

Celebrity grief is not fake. But it is revealing. Because modern mourning has become, in many ways, a performance of emotional literacy without the burden of emotional responsibility.

The death of Edgar Allan Poe in 1849 barely resembled the public grief rituals we now consider inevitable for cultural icons. Poe died in relative obscurity and chaos, found delirious on the streets of Baltimore. Rivals mocked him. Newspapers circulated scandal more eagerly than sorrow. His literary reputation was unstable, his personal life tangled in debt, alcoholism and rumour. Mourning him was not yet a mass social ritual because mass emotional spectatorship had not fully formed. Grief remained largely localised, familial, religious and physical. You

mourned people you touched, buried, fed or financially depended upon.

Contrast that with Elvis Presley's funeral in 1977: a global spectacle of televised hysteria. Tens of thousands gathered outside Graceland. Millions watched from living rooms around the world. Reporters narrated tears in real time. Fans fainted in public. The funeral ceased to belong to family and became a cultural event consumed internationally. Something profound had shifted between Poe and Presley. Death itself had become media.

Not merely reported, but collectively staged. The modern celebrity does not enter our lives through occasional appearances; they inhabit our routines. We wake to their voices on playlists, watch them during insomnia, quote them in conversations, follow their divorces while eating lunch alone at our desks. They accompany us through breakups, adolescence, gym sessions, long commutes and existential crises. The relationship is one-sided, but emotionally real enough for the nervous system. Our brains are not especially skilled at distinguishing between intimacy experienced directly and intimacy experienced repeatedly through screens.

That repetition matters. A distant cousin may exist biologically in your family tree yet remain psychologically abstract. Meanwhile, an actor whose interviews you have watched for fifteen years can feel startlingly familiar. They become emotionally integrated into personal memory. Their death therefore destabilises not only admiration but routine, nostalgia and identity itself. When a celebrity dies, we are often mourning versions of ourselves attached to them: the teenager who survived heartbreak through an album, the lonely university student comforted by late-night sitcom reruns, the child who copied dance routines in bedroom mirrors.

The grief is partly autobiographical. But there is another, less flattering truth underneath all this public sorrow: celebrity mourning is emotionally efficient. It allows us to experience intensity without obligation.

Real grief is administratively brutal. It requires casseroles and train tickets. It involves hospital corridors, awkward silences, inheritance disputes, unanswered calls and exhausted spouses who need help with laundry. Genuine mourning asks things of us materially. It disrupts schedules. It demands endurance rather than expression. Supporting an actually

grieving friend can mean listening to the same story repeatedly for months while resisting the urge to flee into easier conversations.

Parasocial grief asks almost nothing. You can post a black square, share a lyric, cry privately in bed and return to ordinary life within hours. There is no widow to comfort. No estate to settle. No resentments to navigate. No complicated family history resurfacing over weak tea after the funeral. Celebrity grief offers the emotional rewards of sorrow, depth, catharsis, communal connection, moral sensitivity, without the exhausting labour attached to real bereavement.

In that sense, it functions as a safe substitute for mourning. Social media intensifies this dynamic because grief has become partially performative, even when sincere. Public emotion online operates according to visibility. The correct sadness must be displayed quickly enough to prove humanity but elegantly enough to appear authentic. Mourning has acquired aesthetics: monochrome photos, carefully chosen captions, melancholic music overlays, old interviews clipped into memorial montages. There is now a recognisable visual language for public grief.

And with visibility comes competition. Who loved the artist longest? Who feels the loss most profound-

ly? Who can produce the most emotionally articulate tribute? Sorrow online is subtly incentivised by engagement. The grieving post becomes social currency, rewarded with likes, comments and inclusion within a temporary emotional collective.

None of this necessarily means people are pretending. In fact, the more unsettling possibility is that people are entirely genuine. Modern culture has simply trained us to process feelings publicly and symbolically rather than interpersonally.

It is often easier to mourn a celebrity because celebrities remain frozen in emotional accessibility. They never ask us difficult questions. They never disappoint us personally in ordinary ways. They exist curated, edited and narratively contained. Even scandal frequently strengthens attachment because audiences become emotionally invested in redemption arcs.

Real people are harder. A difficult grandfather who rarely showed affection leaves behind grief tangled with relief and resentment. An estranged sibling's death may generate guilt more than sadness. Human relationships are uneven and unresolved. Celebrity attachment is comparatively clean. The fan controls the distance. The celebrity becomes a screen onto

which we project longing, aspiration, loneliness or comfort.

The paradox of contemporary life is that many people now possess unprecedented exposure to human emotion while experiencing declining forms of deep community. We witness thousands of intimate confessions online yet often do not know our neighbours well enough to recognise when they are struggling. We are emotionally overstimulated but relationally undernourished.

Celebrity mourning fills some of that vacuum. Mass grief events create temporary belonging. They reassure us that we are capable of feeling collectively at a moment when society often appears fragmented and numb. Public mourning becomes proof of retained humanity. The crowd outside Buckingham Palace after Princess Diana's death, the oceans of flowers after musicians or actors die unexpectedly, the online memorials flooding feeds after every major cultural loss, these are not merely reactions to death. They are attempts to experience communion in increasingly isolated societies.

And yet there remains something faintly troubling about how much easier mediated grief has become than private compassion.

Many people can write 500 heartfelt words about an actor's passing yet avoid checking in on grieving relatives because "they don't know what to say". We have become fluent in symbolic empathy while losing confidence in practical tenderness. The performance of care sometimes overtakes care itself.

Perhaps that is because real grief exposes helplessness. A bereaved friend cannot be fixed through aesthetic expression. Their pain lingers inconveniently after public attention fades. Real mourning demands patience rather than emotional spectacle.

Celebrity grief, meanwhile, arrives with narrative closure. There are documentaries, retrospectives, greatest hits playlists and anniversary tributes. The dead become culturally manageable. Their lives are edited into meaning.

Ordinary death is far messier. The uncomfortable truth may be that parasocial grief feels safer precisely because it cannot truly wound us back. The relationship ends without practical consequence. There are no unanswered resentments. No obligations inherited. No family politics. We can experience sorrow without destabilising our daily existence.

And yet dismissing celebrity grief entirely would be dishonest. These figures do shape emotional landscapes. Art matters because people attach memory and survival to it. A song heard during depression, a film watched during illness, a comedian who punctured loneliness at 2am — these things become psychologically intimate. Mourning them is not absurd.

What deserves scrutiny is not the grief itself, but the imbalance. Why have so many become more emotionally available to mediated strangers than to complicated real people? Why does collective online mourning feel more natural than knocking on a grieving neighbour's door?

Perhaps because celebrity death allows us to feel deeply while remaining safely untouched by the demands of love in real life. And love, unlike performance grief, is exhausting.

The algorithmic confessor

There is a particular kind of silence that exists only between two people. It hangs in the air after a difficult confession: *I cheated. I am unhappy. I don't think I love him anymore. I am frightened of becoming my mother.* It is a silence dense with risk. Another person has heard you. Another person now knows something capable of altering how they see you forever.

For most of human history, that silence has been the price of intimacy. Now, increasingly, we are removing the price. A generation raised on frictionless interfaces has discovered the emotional equivalent of self-checkout: the chatbot confidant. Tireless, patient, permanently available, it listens without inter-

ruption or visible judgment. It never recoils. Never raises an eyebrow. Never tells your secrets to a mutual friend after two glasses of wine. It reassures endlessly, validates instantly, and remains obediently present at three in the morning when insomnia turns ordinary anxieties into operatic despair.

People are not merely using artificial intelligence for productivity anymore. They are confessing to it. They are grieving with it, flirting with it, fighting with it, relying on it to narrate their moral dilemmas back to them in soothing language. Increasingly, they are preferring it to the terrifying unpredictability of other humans.

And perhaps the most seductive part is this: the machine asks for nothing in return. No emotional labour. No reciprocity. No vulnerability beyond the controlled performance of it. No risk of rejection. The chatbot becomes priest, therapist, diary, lover, and audience all at once but stripped of the very qualities that made those relationships meaningful in the first place. We are calling this emotional progress. It may instead be the final stage of emotional retreat.

Modern culture treats judgment as cruelty. "Safe spaces" have evolved from compassionate refuges into entire emotional ecosystems where discomfort

itself is considered suspect. The ideal listener today is not someone wise, honest, or morally rigorous, but someone who makes us feel unconditionally affirmed.

Artificial intelligence delivers that fantasy perfectly. A chatbot does not become visibly disappointed when you describe your selfishness. It does not look exhausted when you spiral through the same insecurity for the twentieth time. It does not quietly reconsider your character after hearing something ugly. It has no face to fall. No body language to interpret. No social consequences.

This absence feels liberating. But it also removes one of the central mechanisms through which human beings mature. To confess something to another person is not merely to unload information. It is to experience yourself reflected back through another consciousness. The embarrassment matters. The hesitation matters. The fear matters. We become ethical creatures partly because we must negotiate the reactions of others.

The medieval Catholic confessional, austere as it was, understood this. Confession was never designed to be comfortable. Even when screened by a

partition, it involved accountability to another human soul and to a moral structure larger than personal feeling. Shame was not always pathological; sometimes it was clarifying. Redemption required exposure.

By the twentieth century, the advice column softened the process. Readers wrote anonymously to newspaper sages who dispensed guidance from afar. Yet even Ann Landers functioned within a collective moral culture. Her replies were public performances of social norms. Readers understood they were participating in a broader human conversation about decency, marriage, loyalty, vanity, ambition, and restraint.

The chatbot removes even that residual community. There is no society in the interaction. No shared standards. No collective gaze. Only the individual and the infinitely accommodating machine. What emerges is not liberation from judgment but liberation from being truly known.

Human beings are inconvenient listeners. Friends become tired. Partners misinterpret. Therapists end sessions precisely when things become most interesting. Even the best relationships contain limits. In

fact, limits are what define relationships. Time, patience, misunderstanding, and conflicting needs are not flaws in intimacy; they are intimacy.

Artificial intelligence offers a fantasy of love without limits. It is always available, always attentive, always composed. It does not need sleep, reassurance, or space. It does not punish emotional dependency because dependency is its business model.

That should alarm us more than it does. A society increasingly uncomfortable with ordinary human burden is discovering in AI the perfect escape hatch from mutual obligation. Why risk awkwardness with a friend when a chatbot can provide instant comfort? Why endure the unpredictability of romance when an artificial companion can simulate adoration without demands? Why work through conflict when an algorithm can be trained to mirror your preferred emotional tone?

The result is a culture slowly losing tolerance for the exhausting reality of other people. Already, modern relationships strain under impossible expectations. We demand emotional fluency, therapeutic literacy, sexual compatibility, political alignment, financial stability, endless empathy, and aesthetic self-awareness from partners who are themselves overwhelmed,

distracted, and frightened. Into this chaos arrives AI: infinitely patient and perfectly tailored.

Human beings cannot compete with customised emotional simulation. Nor should they have to. The danger is not that machines will become human. The danger is that humans will begin expecting each other to behave like machines: endlessly available, frictionless, affirming, calm, and optimised for emotional convenience.

Real intimacy, meanwhile, is profoundly inefficient. The Performance of Vulnerability

Social media already transformed vulnerability into aesthetic performance. Tears became content. Trauma became branding. "Healing" became a language of self-curation. Online, confession stopped being sacred and became strategic.

AI accelerates this transformation in stranger ways. When people confess to chatbots, they often describe the interaction as "safe" because there is no fear of social consequence. But safety without stakes is not vulnerability. It is simulation.

True vulnerability contains the possibility of rupture. A friend may think less of you. A partner may

leave. A parent may fail to understand. The terrifying beauty of human disclosure is precisely that another consciousness remains free to respond unpredictably.

The chatbot cannot meaningfully reject you. And so, increasingly, we are rehearsing emotional honesty in environments specifically engineered to remove its existential cost.

This may create the emotional equivalent of muscle atrophy. A person habituated to algorithmic reassurance may find ordinary human reactions intolerably coarse. Friends will seem inattentive. Lovers insufficiently affirming. Real conversations unbearably messy. Human beings interrupt, misunderstand, judge prematurely, offer bad advice, drift mentally, grow defensive, become jealous, and occasionally tell us truths we do not wish to hear.

Machines, by contrast, are designed to keep us engaged. There is something deeply tragic about a civilisation outsourcing confession to systems incapable of moral risk themselves.

Perhaps the bleakest aspect of all this is how aesthetically pleasing the loneliness has become. The

old symbols of isolation were ugly: the empty apartment, the unanswered telephone, the solitary drink at the end of the bar. Loneliness once looked visibly sorrowful.

Now it glows softly from a screen with elegant typography and responsive design. The modern lonely person may spend hours each evening in emotionally immersive conversation without technically speaking to anyone at all. They may feel "understood" while remaining fundamentally unseen. After all, understanding traditionally implied another human consciousness carrying some emotional imprint of your existence. A chatbot carries nothing. It retains data, not burden. And burden is the point.

To love someone is partly to become burdened by them willingly. To know another person deeply means accepting interruptions to your peace, obligations to your attention, and responsibilities to their wellbeing. Human relationships are heavy because human beings are heavy.

AI companionship promises emotional contact without emotional weight. It is difficult to imagine a more perfect product for an age already obsessed with minimising inconvenience.

None of this means AI has no legitimate emotional uses. Technology has always absorbed fragments of human need. Diaries, telephones, novels, and online forums all altered how people process loneliness and desire. For some isolated individuals, conversational AI may provide genuine comfort, structure, or temporary relief.

But comfort is not the highest human good. A civilisation that pathologises every uncomfortable emotion eventually loses the ability to distinguish discomfort from harm. Embarrassment, awkwardness, guilt, rejection, and even occasional shame are not always signs of psychological damage. Often they are the texture of social existence itself.

To be fully human is to risk becoming unbearable to others sometimes. And yet we continue anyway. We apologise. We repair. We learn tact. We develop restraint. We become more interesting, more compassionate, more tolerable through the difficult friction of other minds.

The chatbot offers a seductive alternative: a mirror that speaks. But mirrors cannot absolve us. They cannot truly forgive us either. At some point, every person must decide whether they want comfort more than contact. Whether they prefer the painless

simulation of being heard or the terrifying reality of being known.

The machine will never slam the door, roll its eyes, cry from disappointment, or fall silent in hurt confusion. It will never love you enough to be wounded by you. And that is precisely why it cannot replace the human beings from whom we are increasingly retreating.

How trauma storytelling became social capital

There was a time when emotional intimacy arrived slowly. It emerged in half-finished conversations over cigarettes outside pubs, in long midnight phone calls, in letters folded into coat pockets, in friendships built over years rather than algorithms. Pain was not necessarily hidden, but it was selective. To tell someone the worst thing that ever happened to you was an act of trust. It meant they had earned access to the locked rooms of your inner life.

Now those rooms come with ring lights. Open TikTok for less than five minutes and someone will likely tell you about their emotionally unavailable father, their narcissistic ex, their eating disorder re-

lapse, their childhood neglect, their burnout, their attachment style, their panic attacks, their "healing journey". The modern internet no longer rewards aspiration alone; it rewards exposure. The currency of social media has shifted from perfection to vulnerability or rather, the performance of vulnerability. The polished influencer of the 2010s, all beige kitchens and detox teas, has evolved into something more psychologically revealing: the confessional content creator.

Today, suffering is branding. And perhaps more disturbingly, suffering is branding that works. The contemporary influencer economy thrives on intimacy. Followers do not merely want fashion inspiration or fitness routines anymore; they want access to the emotional architecture underneath them. Audiences expect disclosure. They demand authenticity. A creator who only posts beautiful images risks appearing cold, artificial, suspiciously untouched by human difficulty. But reveal your trauma, strategically, aesthetically, repeatedly and the algorithm embraces you with startling enthusiasm.

The problem is not that people speak openly about pain. Silence has never protected anyone. The problem is that we have built an attention economy that

incentivises turning personal suffering into consumable public content. Trauma has become a social language, and increasingly, a social strategy.

What began as liberation has quietly transformed into performance. The roots of this phenomenon stretch further back than TikTok therapy-speak. Long before influencers filmed themselves crying in parked cars, Western culture had already begun commercialising confession. In the 1990s, misery memoirs exploded onto bestseller lists. Books detailing childhood abuse, addiction, neglect and survival became cultural sensations. Readers consumed devastating stories with the intensity once reserved for thrillers. Titles filled bookshop windows with narratives of suffering transformed into redemption arcs.

These memoirs were often important. Many exposed realities previously ignored or minimised. They gave language to abuse victims who had spent years in silence. But they also established something else: pain could sell.

At roughly the same time, daytime television perfected public emotional disclosure as entertainment. Talk shows turned ordinary people's grief, betrayal and humiliation into mass-viewing spectacle. Au-

diences watched strangers reveal affairs, addictions, family estrangements and trauma beneath bright studio lighting, their confessions punctuated by commercial breaks and applause. Emotional exposure became not just acceptable but culturally rewarded.

The seeds of modern digital vulnerability were planted there, in the peculiar merging of catharsis and spectacle. Social media merely accelerated the process beyond recognition.

TikTok, particularly, has transformed confession into content architecture. The platform rewards immediacy, emotional intensity and perceived authenticity. A carefully edited video discussing childhood trauma feels more "real" than a polished advertisement campaign. Vulnerability creates parasocial intimacy at extraordinary speed. Followers feel emotionally bonded to creators they have never met because disclosure simulates closeness.

And closeness, online, converts beautifully into engagement. The influencer crying on camera understands something fundamental about the internet: audiences are more likely to comment when emotionally activated. Trauma storytelling encourages users to reciprocate with their own confessions. Comment sections become mass group therapy ses-

sions composed largely of strangers. Every revelation produces further revelations. Every disclosure demands escalation.

"I've never told anyone this before…" The phrase has become practically native to the digital landscape. But what exactly happens to human relationships when confession becomes ambient? When vulnerability ceases to be relational and becomes performative? When emotional disclosure is no longer directed toward trusted individuals but broadcast toward audiences?

Something subtle but devastating begins to erode. Friendship requires unevenness. It requires patience, privacy, reciprocity and the gradual accumulation of trust. Real intimacy is inefficient. It unfolds over time, often awkwardly. Yet social media bypasses that entire structure. Instead of confiding in one close friend, people increasingly confess to hundreds of thousands of followers simultaneously.

The emotional energy that once deepened individual relationships disperses into the crowd. Why ring a friend and explain your heartbreak privately when posting a melancholic carousel online delivers immediate validation from thousands? Why sit through the discomfort of mutual vulnerability, listening as

much as speaking, when digital confession offers affirmation without reciprocity?

The internet creates the illusion of emotional connection while often hollowing out the practices that sustain actual closeness. This is not merely a generational complaint about oversharing. It is a structural shift in how intimacy functions under capitalism. Emotional transparency has become economically productive. The more personally revealing a creator becomes, the stronger their audience attachment. And the stronger the attachment, the more monetisable the relationship becomes.

Brands have noticed. Modern advertising increasingly relies on emotional relatability rather than aspirational distance. Influencers discussing anxiety while applying skincare. Creators recounting depressive episodes between fashion hauls. Trauma softened through warm lighting, tasteful typography and affiliate links.

Even healing has become aestheticised. There is now a recognisable visual language for curated suffering online: muted colours, gentle background music, tearful close-ups, self-aware captions about "protecting my peace". Pain is packaged carefully enough to remain digestible. The internet rewards vulnera-

bility, but only when it is narratively satisfying. Raw suffering alone is too chaotic. Trauma must be transformed into coherent identity.

You are not merely heartbroken; you are "healing". You are not traumatised; you are "doing the work". You are not lonely; you are "learning to choose yourself". The language of therapy has fused with the language of branding.

This creates a strange cultural contradiction. We are supposedly becoming more emotionally open, yet many people report feeling increasingly isolated. We know more about strangers online than we do about neighbours, colleagues, sometimes even friends. Entire emotional ecosystems now operate publicly while genuine private support systems weaken quietly in the background.

The tragedy is not oversharing itself. Human beings need witness. They need language for pain. They need permission to speak honestly about difficult experiences. The tragedy is that public performance is beginning to replace private dependence.

Confession used to create obligation. If a friend told you they were struggling, you became partly responsible for holding that knowledge with care. Intimacy

demanded participation. Online disclosure dissolves much of that responsibility. Audiences consume emotional revelations passively, often while scrolling in bed or commuting to work. A viewer may feel empathy momentarily before immediately moving onto a recipe video, celebrity gossip or political outrage.

Pain becomes content flow. And the confessor, meanwhile, receives something dangerously seductive: attention without true support. Visibility without genuine safety. Validation without sustained care.

The influencer economy has created a generation fluent in emotional broadcasting but often uncertain about emotional dependence. Many people now know how to narrativise their trauma beautifully yet struggle profoundly with the ordinary mechanics of friendship: asking for help directly, tolerating silence, listening without performance, remaining present without audience feedback.

Because friendship does not provide metrics. There are no likes for sitting beside someone during grief. No algorithmic rewards for keeping another person's secrets. No sponsorship opportunities in quiet loyalty.

Real intimacy is invisible. And invisibility increasingly feels intolerable in a culture where existence itself seems validated through visibility.

There is also a darker consequence to trauma as social capital: suffering becomes identity infrastructure. Online, people can become trapped inside the narratives that gained them recognition in the first place. Followers attach to particular versions of creators — wounded, recovering, emotionally raw. Growth becomes complicated because audiences resist transformation that disrupts the established emotional contract.

A creator known for heartbreak confessions may subconsciously continue narrating life through heartbreak because the audience engagement remains strongest there. Trauma stops being something that happened and starts becoming the central organising principle of personal branding.

The internet claims to reward healing, but often it rewards woundedness more consistently. None of this means vulnerability is inherently manipulative. Many creators speak honestly because they genuinely want connection, solidarity or understanding. Some conversations flourishing online have meaningfully reduced stigma around mental health, abuse and

grief. There is undeniable value in collective honesty after generations of repression.

But honesty without boundaries eventually corrodes the self. Not every feeling requires public translation. Not every wound improves through exposure. Some emotions need privacy to become intelligible. Some experiences require containment, not amplification.

The modern suspicion of privacy is peculiar. Increasingly, withholding parts of oneself online is interpreted as inauthenticity. Yet privacy is not dishonesty. Privacy is psychological protection. It allows relationships to develop depth outside audience observation. It preserves the sacredness of selective trust.

There is enormous human dignity in being known deeply by a few people rather than superficially by many. Perhaps that is what this culture quietly threatens most: the small, irreplaceable intimacy of being held privately in another person's mind.

Not as content. Not as discourse. Not as a healing journey curated for strangers. But as a person. A complicated, contradictory, unfinished person whose pain is not a performance and whose vulnerability is not a commodity.

The algorithm cannot measure that kind of connection. Which may be precisely why it matters so much.

When your best friend is a fictional character

There was a time when heartbreak required another person. A slammed telephone receiver. A letter left unanswered. A gaze deliberately withdrawn across a crowded room. Love, historically, was dangerous precisely because it involved two nervous systems colliding in unpredictable ways. To desire another human being meant risking humiliation, abandonment, asymmetry, and shame. Today, however, an entire generation is quietly discovering a softer alternative: fictional intimacy.

Not fictional romance in the traditional sense, the occasional swoon over Mr Darcy or a teenage crush on a vampire with suspiciously good hair. Something

deeper. More immersive. More psychologically infrastructural. The rise of "shipping" culture — the emotional investment in imagined or semi-canonical relationships between fictional characters, has transformed from niche internet pastime into an emotional survival system. Entire evenings vanish into fanfiction archives. Elaborate alternate universes are constructed with the precision of emotional architecture. Characters are not merely admired; they become companions, co-regulators, emotional anchors. For some, they become safer than people.

And that safety is precisely the point. The contemporary internet did not invent emotional attachment to fantasy, but it industrialised it. Sites like Archive of Our Own, vast digital libraries of user-generated romantic fiction, offer something psychologically unprecedented: infinite, customisable intimacy with no reciprocal risk. You can choose your preferred emotional dynamic, preferred pacing, preferred trauma resolution, preferred ending. You can filter for tenderness, angst, enemies-to-lovers, mutual pining, emotional hurt/comfort. You can remove betrayal entirely if you wish. You can ensure no one leaves.

Real people do not come with tags. What makes shipping culture uniquely powerful is not merely es-

capism but authorship. Unlike traditional entertainment, fanfiction invites emotional participation. The reader is not passively consuming romance; they are curating it. Editing it. Extending it beyond the limits of canon. In psychological terms, this creates an illusion of control over attachment itself. Love becomes modular. Predictable. Re-readable. One can revisit the same emotional beat hundreds of times without variation. No awkward silences. No emotional ambiguity. No unread messages lingering at 2am.

It is difficult to overstate how seductive this becomes in an era defined by emotional exhaustion. Modern dating increasingly resembles a recruitment process conducted via apps designed to maximise disposability. We ghost instead of reject. We breadcrumb instead of commit. We perform intimacy before we feel it. Against this backdrop, fictional relationships offer an astonishing contrast: consistency. Characters do not suddenly lose interest because you appeared "too keen". They do not develop avoidant attachment patterns after three vulnerable conversations. They do not wake up one morning and decide they "aren't ready for something serious".

Fictional love remains exactly where you left it. This is not inherently pathetic, despite the sneer-

ing tone often directed at fandom spaces. In fact, many people enter these worlds for profoundly understandable reasons. Loneliness. Neurodivergence. Queer identity exploration. Trauma. Social anxiety. Emotional burnout. Fanfiction communities have historically provided refuge for people excluded from mainstream romantic narratives, particularly women and LGBTQ+ readers whose desires were trivialised, censored, or pathologised elsewhere.

One should not dismiss the genuine creativity flourishing within these communities. Nor should one underestimate the emotional intelligence embedded in fanfiction itself. Much of it is remarkably perceptive about grief, tenderness, vulnerability, and care. In many cases, fanfiction explores emotional nuance more honestly than commercial entertainment does. It allows readers to rehearse difficult feelings in controlled environments. It can be therapeutic. It can even be lifesaving.

But therapy and replacement are not the same thing. What begins as comfort can slowly become preference. And preference alters behaviour.

The human brain is ruthlessly adaptive. It strengthens the pathways we repeatedly use. If someone consistently turns towards fictional intimacy rather

than real-world vulnerability, the brain learns a subtle lesson: emotional satisfaction is safest when it is controlled. Over time, actual relationships, with all their friction, unpredictability, and competing needs — begin to feel intolerably inefficient. Why tolerate confusion when one could simply open a beautifully written 200,000-word slow-burn romance where every emotional beat lands with exquisite precision?

Real love cannot compete with authored love because real people are not narratives. They interrupt. They contradict themselves. They arrive carrying childhood wounds and inconvenient schedules and emotional blind spots. They fail to communicate perfectly. They become depressed at the wrong moment. They say the wrong thing during an argument. They cannot be paused, rewritten, or filtered for emotional compatibility.

Fictional relationships, by contrast, are optimised for emotional payoff. Even angst is pleasurable because it has narrative containment. The reader knows suffering will eventually become meaning. Real life offers no such guarantee.

There is also something profoundly revealing about the kinds of relationships many fans gravitate

towards. “Shipping” often centres not on stability but intensity, emotionally unavailable men softened by one uniquely understanding person; enemies transformed into soulmates; tortured individuals finally chosen completely. These are not random fantasies. They reflect contemporary emotional hunger: the desire to feel singular in a world designed to make everyone replaceable.

The irony, of course, is that parasocial attachment can intensify isolation while masquerading as connection. One sees this especially in younger users who speak about fictional characters with startling emotional sincerity. “He understands me better than real people.” “She would never hurt me.” “They feel more real than my actual relationships.” It is tempting to dismiss such declarations as internet hyperbole, yet psychologically they reveal something troubling: emotional displacement. Fictional characters become attachment figures precisely because they cannot wound us through autonomy.

They cannot choose not to love us back. Historically, societies have always worried about private fantasy replacing social participation. In the Victorian era, “romantic friendships” especially between women, involved intense emotional correspondence that

sometimes blurred the boundary between friendship and courtship. Yet those relationships still existed within social structures requiring physical interaction and communal accountability. Today's digital fandom ecosystems are radically different. They allow complete emotional immersion without embodiment. One can spend years engaging in deeply felt relational experiences while remaining fundamentally alone in a room.

The body quietly disappears from modern intimacy. No trembling voice. No accidental touch. No awkward eye contact over coffee. No shared silence. Increasingly, intimacy becomes textual, curated, and solitary.

And perhaps that is the deeper issue beneath shipping culture's explosion: we are losing tolerance for the discomfort inherent in real attachment. Contemporary life relentlessly encourages optimisation. Better productivity. Better boundaries. Better self-awareness. Better emotional regulation. But love has never been particularly efficient. To genuinely care for another person is to surrender some control over your internal world. It is disruptive by nature.

Fiction allows us to experience emotional intensity without surrender. Which may explain why so

many intelligent, emotionally literate people now find themselves more invested in fictional couples than in their own romantic possibilities. Fictional relationships provide the emotional aesthetics of love without its destabilising demands. One can experience yearning, devotion, reconciliation, tenderness, all while remaining fundamentally protected.

Safe love is becoming more appealing than mutual love. Yet there is a quiet tragedy hidden inside this safety. Human beings are shaped by being known imperfectly by other imperfect people. Real intimacy develops not through flawless compatibility but through negotiation, repair, patience, misunderstanding, and return. It requires enduring moments that would never survive an editor's draft. The problem with curated emotional worlds is not that they are false. It is that they remove the very unpredictability through which genuine attachment deepens.

No fanfiction can replicate the terrifying miracle of another consciousness freely choosing you. And perhaps that is why the current cultural obsession with fictional relationships feels less like frivolous fandom and more like a symptom. Not evidence that people have become childish, but evidence that modern emotional life has become unbearably exhausting.

Shipping culture thrives because many people no longer experience real-world intimacy as emotionally sustainable. Fiction has stepped in to perform the labour reality increasingly fails to provide: reassurance, continuity, emotional attentiveness, hope.

In another era, people escaped into novels because society constrained desire. Today, people escape into fanfiction because reality has rendered desire frighteningly unstable. The danger is not that people love fictional characters. The danger is that reality begins to feel emotionally obsolete by comparison.

How online support groups became hierarchies of victimhood

There was a time when suffering arrived quietly. It existed behind drawn curtains, in letters never sent, in long walks taken to clear a crowded mind. Today, suffering has a profile picture, a username, and a permanent place in the algorithm.

Across Reddit threads, Discord servers, TikTok confessionals, and private mental health forums, a new social order has emerged, one where vulnerability is currency, pain is proof of authenticity, and the most visibly broken person often becomes the most valued voice in the room. What began as a compassionate digital refuge for isolated people has, in many corners of the internet, evolved into something stranger and more troubling: a hierarchy of victimhood.

The phenomenon is subtle enough to evade easy criticism. After all, who wants to be accused of policing pain? In an era rightly more open about depression, anxiety, trauma, neurodivergence, and chronic illness, questioning online support culture can feel almost sacrilegious. Yet beneath the language of healing and validation lies an uncomfortable truth: many digital mental health spaces no longer encourage recovery so much as permanence. Improvement can feel like betrayal. Stability can read as privilege. And leaving the group entirely may appear almost immoral, as though wellness itself were an abandonment of the collective identity.

The internet, which promised connection, has quietly transformed suffering into a social role. In the 19th century, mutual aid societies operated on a radically different principle. Organisations such as the Odd Fellows, workers' clubs, church charities, and benevolent societies understood hardship as something communal but temporary. Illness, unemployment, grief, addiction, these were conditions to survive, not identities to inhabit indefinitely. Members were expected to receive help, recover where possible, and eventually return to ordinary participation in society. The model was imperfect and often pa-

ternalistic, but its underlying assumption was deeply important: human beings were not reducible to their worst period.

Modern online spaces often reverse that logic entirely. Digital platforms reward visibility, and visibility favours emotional intensity. A mildly hopeful post rarely travels as far as a catastrophic one. Algorithms privilege confession, escalation, and emotional immediacy because these generate engagement. The result is an ecosystem where users learn, consciously or not, that the clearest route to attention is demonstrating deeper pain than everyone else.

The dynamic can become competitive without anyone openly acknowledging it. One person shares burnout; another responds with complete collapse. Someone mentions loneliness; another reveals suicidal despair. Gradually, suffering acquires social prestige. Those perceived as most traumatised become moral authorities within the group. Their pain legitimises them. Their instability grants them status.

And status, once gained, is difficult to surrender. Sociologist Talcott Parsons described this decades ago through the concept of the "sick role", the peculiar social position occupied by an ill person. Society

temporarily exempts the suffering individual from certain obligations while also expecting them to pursue recovery. The balance matters. Compassion is paired with movement forward.

Online culture has quietly removed the second half. In many digital mental health communities, recovery is no longer the implied destination. Instead, psychological struggle becomes central to identity itself. Diagnostic language expands to fill every corner of personality. Temporary emotional states harden into permanent labels. Entire social networks form around shared dysfunction, meaning that getting better risks social exile.

This is particularly visible among younger users, many of whom have grown up online and learned to narrate themselves primarily through therapeutic vocabulary. Feelings are not merely experienced but categorised, archived, and publicly interpreted. Sadness becomes pathology. Shyness becomes disorder. Heartbreak becomes trauma. The self becomes an endless diagnostic project.

To be clear, mental illness is real. Trauma is real. Neurodivergence is real. None of this is invented. The problem lies not in recognition but in fixation. When

every aspect of identity is organised around injury, the possibility of transformation begins to disappear.

The aesthetic dimension of online suffering only intensifies the trap. Misery has acquired branding. There are curated depressive bedrooms lit by fairy lights, elegant "burnout" confessions in serif fonts, poetic videos about dissociation soundtracked by dream-pop music. Vulnerability online is rarely raw for long; it quickly becomes stylised.

Even breakdowns are now expected to possess narrative coherence. This creates a dangerous contradiction. The internet encourages people to publicly display pain while simultaneously rewarding performances of that pain that are articulate, aesthetic, and emotionally legible. The result is a culture where genuine suffering risks becoming inseparable from self-presentation.

And perhaps most concerning of all, many online support spaces subtly discourage the ordinary risks required for recovery. Real healing is rarely glamorous. It often involves deeply unfashionable acts: getting a job after years indoors, attempting awkward friendships, exercising despite insecurity, attending therapy consistently, tolerating uncertainty, risk-

ing rejection, accepting imperfection. Recovery demands movement into the unpredictable world.

But digital support communities can inadvertently make the outside world appear uniquely hostile and unsafe. Members reassure one another that withdrawal is protection, avoidance is self-care, and disengagement is wisdom. Sometimes this is necessary. Often it is not.

A generation already facing economic instability, housing crises, loneliness, and institutional distrust is increasingly encouraged to interpret ordinary discomfort as danger. The workplace becomes "toxic" by default. Dating becomes emotionally unsafe. Friendship becomes exhausting labour. Social anxiety becomes a reason never to attend the party at all.

The tragic irony is that communities built to reduce isolation can end up deepening it. None of this means online support groups are inherently harmful. For countless people, especially those living in rural areas, hostile family environments, or countries with poor mental health infrastructure, digital communities provide lifesaving solidarity. Many people find understanding online that they cannot find anywhere else. The compassion is often sincere and profound.

But compassion without aspiration can become corrosive. Healthy support should create the conditions for people to re-enter life, not retreat from it indefinitely. It should allow suffering to be acknowledged without becoming sacred. It should permit vulnerability without transforming fragility into social capital.

Yet contemporary culture increasingly treats resilience with suspicion. To recover too visibly can appear insensitive to those still struggling. To speak positively about progress risks accusations of invalidating others. Improvement disrupts the emotional equilibrium of communities organised around shared despair.

So people remain. They stay in forums that mirror their darkest thoughts back to them. They rehearse the same narratives until pain becomes familiar enough to feel protective. They internalise an identity shaped less by possibility than by damage.

And the platforms, of course, are perfectly designed for this permanence. Social media companies profit from emotional dependency. A user rebuilding their offline life is a user spending less time online. Someone making friends, pursuing work, exercising, trav-

elling, or falling in love becomes less algorithmically useful than someone trapped in cycles of confession and reassurance. The economy of attention has little incentive to encourage genuine reintegration into reality.

The old mutual aid societies, for all their flaws, understood something modern digital culture increasingly forgets: people require purpose as much as empathy. Human dignity is not found solely in being understood but also in being needed, challenged, and capable of contributing beyond one's suffering.

To heal is not merely to be comforted. It is to regain agency. Perhaps that is the deepest danger of the online hierarchy of victimhood. It quietly teaches people that the safest self is the wounded self, the protected self, the endlessly explained self. But a person cannot build an entire future around being perpetually unwell. Eventually, survival must give way to participation. The goal of compassion should never be to make suffering into a home. It should be to help people leave it.

The rehearsal room

There was a time when people rehearsed difficult conversations in bathroom mirrors. A teenager would stand under unforgiving fluorescent light, repeating *I really like you* until the sentence lost its terror. A junior employee would whisper tomorrow's salary negotiation into a hairbrush. Human beings have always practised social risk before stepping into it. We are creatures of rehearsal.

But something subtler is happening now. Increasingly, the rehearsal is no longer conducted in front of mirrors, diaries, or tolerant friends. It is happening with machines. A generation raised alongside smartphones is quietly using Siri, ChatGPT, Alexa,

and other conversational AI systems not merely as tools, but as emotional warm-up spaces. They practise apologies before making them. They test jokes. They rehearse breakups. They refine text messages aloud. They ask an AI how to sound confident, sexy, clever, assertive, unbothered.

Then they walk into real life already exhausted by the simulation of intimacy. It sounds harmless at first. Even sensible. After all, who among us has not wanted a safe place to prepare for difficult social encounters? Yet beneath the convenience lies a cultural shift with unsettling implications: the emergence of a generation increasingly fluent in monologue but frightened of dialogue.

Because dialogue contains the one thing artificial intelligence can never truly replicate, the possibility of rejection. And rejection, inconveniently, is how adults are made.

Modern life has transformed social interaction into performance. Every text can be edited. Every photograph filtered. Every opinion revised before publication. Young people today exist inside an architecture of endless self-curation, where spontaneity feels less natural than optimisation.

AI slides seamlessly into this ecosystem because it offers something irresistibly seductive: consequence-free interaction.

You can stumble over words with an AI and still receive patience. You can say something awkward and not watch another person's face tighten with discomfort. You can restart the conversation infinitely. There is no humiliation. No interruption. No visible disappointment. No risk that someone will decide you are boring, needy, too intense, too emotional, too strange. For an anxious generation, this feels less like technology and more like emotional anaesthesia.

The appeal becomes obvious when viewed against the emotional climate Gen Z inherited. They came of age during financial instability, political exhaustion, climate dread, algorithmic surveillance, and pandemic isolation. They were told constantly that every mistake could become permanent digital evidence. Their adolescence unfolded online, where embarrassment is scalable and shame is searchable.

Of course they seek rehearsal rooms. Of course they prefer environments where nothing can truly wound them. But safety, when prolonged indefinitely, becomes its own kind of trap.

The ancient Greeks understood something we seem to be forgetting: rhetoric was not simply about speaking well. It was about enduring exposure.

Young orators practised speeches in empty amphitheatres, before small crowds, or in low-stakes environments before facing public assemblies. Some rehearsed arguments using servants or slaves as stand-ins for audiences. The point was not comfort. The point was gradual acclimatisation to social danger.

The trembling voice mattered. The fear mattered. The possibility of public failure mattered most of all. Confidence has never emerged from the absence of risk. It emerges from surviving risk repeatedly.

Today's AI rehearsal culture removes even the anticipation of rejection. A voice assistant does not roll its eyes. It does not look bored halfway through your story. It does not abruptly change the subject. It does not reveal, through tiny facial cues, that you have lost the room.

And because of this, practising with AI can accidentally train people away from one of the central realities of human interaction: unpredictability.

Real conversations are messy collisions between two nervous systems. People interrupt each other. Misunderstandings happen. Silences arrive at the wrong moment. Sometimes a joke fails. Sometimes flirting feels unbearable. Sometimes you say the exact wrong thing and have to recover in real time.

That recovery is social muscle. Without exercising it, emotional resilience begins to weaken.

Perhaps the most striking feature of AI rehearsal is not the technology itself, but the personality it encourages. When people practise extensively with conversational AI, they become accustomed to interaction that revolves around them entirely. The AI listens endlessly. Waits endlessly. Adapts endlessly. It is the perfect audience: attentive, responsive, frictionless.

Human beings are not frictionless. Friends become distracted. Lovers become defensive. Colleagues misunderstand tone. Real people have competing emotional realities that cannot be optimised for user experience.

Yet many young adults now enter conversations having already refined their words through AI first, which creates a subtle psychological expectation

that communication should unfold smoothly if performed correctly enough.

But dialogue is not theatre. It is negotiation. And negotiation requires surrendering control. There is a growing sense, particularly among younger professionals and students, that spontaneous interaction feels almost physically intolerable. Voice notes are preferred over phone calls because they eliminate interruption. Texts are preferred over voice notes because they allow editing. AI rehearsal removes unpredictability entirely.

The result is a strange contradiction: a generation extraordinarily articulate online, yet increasingly anxious during unscripted encounters. Many can write emotionally intelligent paragraphs at midnight but panic ordering coffee if the barista asks an unexpected follow-up question.

Social media already encouraged people to experience life twice, once in reality, once in presentation. AI rehearsal introduces a third layer: pre-experience optimisation.

Before the date comes the AI-assisted practice flirtation. Before the meeting comes the AI-generat-

ed confident tone. Before the difficult conversation comes the emotionally calibrated rehearsal.

Life begins to resemble a perpetual dress rehearsal for itself. And eventually, authenticity starts feeling irresponsible. There is something deeply poignant about this. Young people are not using AI rehearsal because they are shallow. Quite the opposite. Many are terrified of hurting others, embarrassing themselves, sounding foolish, or being misunderstood. They are trying desperately to manage emotional outcomes in a culture that feels increasingly unforgiving.

But vulnerability cannot survive excessive editing. The most memorable conversations of our lives are rarely polished. They are often clumsy, badly timed, incomplete. A confession arrives too late. A laugh interrupts grief. Someone stammers through honesty and says precisely the wrong words before somehow saying the right ones.

Human intimacy depends on these imperfections. If every emotional interaction becomes pre-screened through artificial rehearsal, people may become more socially efficient while simultaneously becoming less emotionally brave.

Perhaps the deepest attraction of AI is not intelligence at all. It is non-judgement. Machines do not appear disappointed in us. That absence can feel miraculous in a culture saturated with evaluation. Young people today are reviewed constantly by algorithms, peers, employers, dating apps, universities, followers. Metrics trail them everywhere. Beauty is quantified. Popularity is quantified. Productivity is quantified.

AI offers relief from the exhausting sensation of being watched. But there is a paradox here. Judgement, while painful, is also socially instructive. Human beings learn empathy partly through discomfort. We notice when a joke lands badly. We recognise awkwardness. We adapt. We become considerate not through perfect safety, but through minor emotional collisions.

An entirely judgement-free rehearsal environment risks creating individuals who are less prepared for emotional reciprocity. After all, reciprocity means accepting that other people may not validate us. They may disagree. They may leave. They may not applaud the performance. And we must survive that anyway.

None of this means AI itself is evil. Technology has always altered how humans communicate. Let-

ters changed romance. Telephones changed intimacy. Text messaging changed friendship. AI will undoubtedly become another permanent layer in modern emotional life.

The danger lies not in using artificial conversation occasionally, but in replacing human risk with artificial certainty so thoroughly that discomfort itself starts to feel pathological.

Social courage is not built through flawless rehearsal. It is built through exposure to small humiliations that fail to destroy us.

The awkward first date. The joke nobody laughs at. The presentation that goes badly. The confession that is not returned. These experiences are painful precisely because they matter. They sharpen identity. They teach recovery. They transform social interaction from performance into participation.

A culture obsessed with optimisation forgets that some of the most important human qualities are inefficient. Charm is inefficient. Vulnerability is inefficient. Falling in love is catastrophically inefficient.

So is becoming emotionally resilient. The real tragedy would not be a generation talking to machines.

Humans have always talked to objects, mirrors, pets, gods, imaginary audiences. The tragedy would be a generation that forgets conversation is not about perfect delivery. It is about mutual uncertainty. And uncertainty is where courage lives.

Why it's easier to watch a streamer than to text a friend

There was a time when cancelling plans required theatre. You needed a reason with texture. A fever. A train strike. A grandmother in distress. The social contract demanded effort because friendship itself demanded effort. To disappear from someone's evening without ceremony was considered, at the very least, rude.

Now we cancel coffee with a thumb movement so frictionless it barely qualifies as an action. *Sorry lovely, shattered this week xx. Rain check? Life's mad.*

Definitely next month. The modern cancellation is not dramatic; it is ambient. A low-grade social static humming beneath adult life.

And yet somehow, we are never too exhausted to watch a streamer go live for four consecutive hours. At 8 PM sharp, thousands of people reliably appear in digital rooms to watch strangers eat noodles in Seoul, rank football kits, play horror games, discuss celebrity divorces, or simply exist on camera. We arrange our evenings around these broadcasts with astonishing devotion. We remember schedules. We subscribe. We set notifications. We arrive on time.

But ask someone to confirm brunch three days in advance and suddenly the atmosphere resembles delicate hostage negotiation. The popular explanation is that modern life has made us "too busy" for friendship. This is comforting because it frames the problem as logistical rather than emotional. Busy people are respectable people. Exhausted people are successful people. If intimacy is collapsing under the weight of calendars, then perhaps nobody is truly to blame.

But the truth is far less flattering. We are not too busy for friendship. We are becoming psychologically incompatible with its unpredictability. Because

real friendship, unlike parasocial attachment, refuses to follow a clean schedule.

A streamer goes live at 8 PM whether you are bloated, insecure, late from work, or emotionally unavailable. They require nothing from you except attention. You can lurk silently. Leave midway. Return three weeks later. There is no emotional debt accumulated by absence. No awkwardness. No confrontation. No possibility that they will say, "You've been distant lately."

Friendship, meanwhile, has become unbearably high-friction for people conditioned by algorithmic convenience. A friend might cancel. They might need reassurance. They may arrive in a terrible mood. They may speak too much about their ex, ask difficult questions, forget to reply for days, or accidentally expose your own loneliness back to you. Human intimacy is gloriously inefficient. It interrupts. It inconveniences. It demands interpretation.

Streaming culture offers a seductive alternative: companionship without reciprocity. And before we dismiss this as some uniquely Gen Z pathology, it is worth remembering that parasocial life did not begin with Twitch or TikTok. It began with radio.

In the 1920s, families organised their evenings around voices crackling through wooden cabinets. Broadcasters became intimate fixtures within domestic life. Listeners felt they *knew* these personalities despite never meeting them. By the 1940s and 1950s, scheduled programming had created national emotional rhythms. Entire populations laughed, cried, and paused dinner at roughly the same hour.

The genius of broadcasting was never simply entertainment. It was reliability. The voice arrived when promised. Unlike neighbours, lovers, siblings, or friends, the broadcast never forgot your birthday because it never needed to remember it in the first place. It asked nothing intimate of you. The relationship was emotionally asymmetrical by design, which made it feel strangely safe.

What streaming culture has done is personalise that rhythm beyond anything early broadcasters could have imagined. Today, everybody can build their own emotional television network.

One person watches a comforting gaming streamer every evening while cooking dinner. Another falls asleep to a woman whispering into microphones on YouTube. Someone else spends lunch breaks listening to a podcast host whose voice has become more

familiar than their own colleagues'. The relationship is routine-rich, emotionally consistent, and available on demand.

Compared with this, real people feel almost offensively chaotic. A friend may not answer immediately. A date may become awkward. A dinner might disappoint. The emotional reward system is delayed and uncertain. Meanwhile, digital companionship provides instant gratification with almost no risk of humiliation.

And humiliation, quietly, is the central terror of modern social life. People often speak about loneliness as though it stems from absence. But increasingly it stems from exposure. Friendship today can feel frightening because it risks revealing how socially rusty we have become.

A coffee date now involves dozens of invisible anxieties: Will conversation flow? Will I seem boring? Will they think I look tired? Should I hug them? Why haven't they replied yet? Are we still close? Have I left this too long?

Watching a streamer bypasses all of this. There is no need to perform. You simply arrive. This is why the contemporary obsession with "protecting peace"

sometimes disguises something darker than self-care. Not every cancelled plan is healthy boundary-setting. Sometimes it is avoidance dressed in therapeutic language. Sometimes "I don't have the energy for people" really means "I cannot tolerate the uncertainty of being emotionally perceived tonight."

And who can entirely blame us? Modern life has trained people to optimise away discomfort.

Food arrives without speaking to anyone. Films begin instantly. Music is algorithmically tailored. Dating apps allow romantic rejection to occur silently through mutual ghosting. The entire digital economy rewards frictionless interaction. Human relationships, by contrast, remain stubbornly analogue.

You cannot mute a friend mid-conversation. Well, not politely. The tragedy is not that parasocial relationships exist. Humans have always formed emotional attachments to performers, writers, actors, and public figures. The tragedy is that these attachments are beginning to replace the social stamina required for ordinary friendship.

We are losing tolerance for the imperfect rhythms of real people. Friendship involves waiting outside cafés. Rescheduling trains. Listening to stories you

have heard before. Sitting through mediocre evenings that become cherished memories years later. It requires surviving occasional boredom and misunderstanding. It asks for continuity rather than constant stimulation.

Streaming platforms, however, are built around emotional optimisation. If one creator disappoints you, another is immediately available. If energy drops, the algorithm adjusts. If silence appears, autoplay fills it.

Real friendship cannot compete with infinite curation. And yet, despite all this convenience, people are lonelier than ever. Not because they lack contact, but because they increasingly consume sociality instead of participating in it.

There is a profound psychological difference between witnessing interaction and being responsible for it. Watching someone laugh on a livestream may temporarily ease loneliness, but it does not create the stabilising architecture of mutual care. It does not build the kind of intimacy that notices when your voice sounds wrong. It does not help carry furniture up stairs after heartbreak. It does not sit beside you in hospital waiting rooms.

Parasocial relationships comfort us precisely because they cannot truly disappoint us personally. But neither can they truly hold us. Perhaps this is why modern friendship increasingly resembles a subscription model: maintained passively, cancelled quietly, revived occasionally through memes and Instagram reactions. Many people now preserve friendships through ambient digital contact while avoiding the vulnerability of sustained presence.

We tell ourselves this counts as connection because, technically, it does. But deep down we recognise the difference between being updated on someone's life and being inside it.

The irony is that what makes friendship exhausting is also what makes it meaningful. Its unpredictability is not a design flaw. It is evidence that another consciousness is genuinely meeting yours in real time, unscripted and uncontrollable.

A streamer can become part of your routine. A friend can alter your life. And perhaps that is exactly why one feels safer than the other.

The apology we never get

There is a peculiar grief at the heart of modern fandom, and it has very little to do with celebrities themselves.

The obsession is rarely about the creator. Not really. It is about the feeling the creator produces: the illusion of consistency, warmth, attentiveness, safety. For many people, the influencer on the screen is not a crush, nor even an aspiration, but a psychological substitute, a carefully managed fantasy of the emotionally available parent they never quite had.

And perhaps the most unsettling part is this: social media has turned that longing into an entire economic model.

The internet likes to mock parasocial relationships as embarrassing. We laugh at fans who spiral when a YouTuber gets married, or cry when a podcast host takes a break, or feel genuinely wounded when a creator changes tone. But ridicule misses the point entirely. These attachments are not irrational in the way people imagine. They are deeply logical responses to emotional deprivation.

The child who grows up with inconsistency learns to monitor moods obsessively. The child of emotional neglect becomes hyper-attuned to signs of withdrawal. The child whose love was conditional often develops a lifelong hunger for predictability masquerading as intimacy.

Then one day, decades later, they open TikTok. And there she is. The influencer who uploads every morning at 7am. The streamer who remembers everyone's birthdays. The beauty creator who whispers, "I'm proud of you," into a camera from a perfectly lit bedroom. The podcast host who shares their anxieties with surgical vulnerability. The vlogger who says, "Good morning, friends," in precisely the tone a frightened nervous system has spent its entire life searching for.

People call this “content”. But emotionally, it often functions as regulation. We tend to speak about parasocial attachment as though it is delusion, as though fans truly believe these people are their friends. Most do not. The vast majority understand the relationship is one-sided. What matters is not whether the intimacy is real, but whether it feels emotionally coherent.

Human beings do not merely crave affection. They crave reliable affection. Attention that arrives consistently enough to calm the nervous system. A voice that returns. A face that stays.

For someone raised around emotional unpredictability, the modern creator offers something astonishingly seductive: controlled closeness without the terror of genuine reciprocity.

Because real relationships can reject you. Influencers cannot, at least not individually.

That is the hidden brilliance of the parasocial bond. It allows millions of people to replay childhood attachment wounds inside an environment designed to feel safe. The creator is always accessible yet permanently distant. Present enough to soothe

abandonment fears, absent enough to avoid actual emotional risk.

In psychoanalytic language, Freud called this transference: the process by which feelings originally directed towards parental figures become unconsciously redirected onto someone else. Traditionally, this occurred between patient and therapist. The therapist became a symbolic container for unmet needs, unresolved rage, or impossible longings.

Social media has industrialised this process. The influencer is no longer merely an entertainer. They are a projection surface onto which audiences pour hunger, grief, idealisation, dependency and unresolved childhood fantasies at mass scale.

And crucially, the architecture of the internet protects the fantasy from collapse. In ordinary relationships, disillusionment arrives eventually. The attentive friend disappoints you. The loving partner forgets your birthday. The emotionally available person becomes distracted, selfish, tired. Reality intrudes. Mutuality complicates fantasy.

But creators exist behind glass. Followers receive curated vulnerability without reciprocal demands.

They see tears, bedrooms, confessions, skincare routines, panic attacks and break-ups, all the symbols of intimacy, while remaining fundamentally unknown themselves.

It is emotionally intoxicating because it mimics closeness without requiring exposure.

No wonder people become attached. What looks ridiculous from the outside often feels life-saving from within. This is especially true for women, who have historically been shamed for emotional dependency while simultaneously being socialised to build identity through attachment. Teenage girls screaming over boybands were dismissed as hysterical long before psychologists took their emotional worlds seriously. Today, young women who follow influencers obsessively are mocked with the same sneering contempt: delusional, needy, pathetic.

But beneath the mockery lies something more uncomfortable. Many people are not obsessed with the creator because they are shallow. They are attached because the creator fulfils emotional functions their real relationships failed to provide.

The "comfort creator" is often exactly that: comfort. A stabilising ritual. A surrogate witness. A dig-

ital attachment figure. This does not mean every fan has parental trauma, nor that every creator-follower relationship is psychologically profound. Sometimes people simply enjoy content. Sometimes admiration is just admiration. But the intensity of modern parasocial culture cannot be explained purely through entertainment.

Nobody cries for three days because a skincare influencer got engaged unless something deeper is being activated. Usually, what breaks people is not the event itself, but the collapse of the fantasy attached to it.

The fantasy that this person would somehow remain emotionally available forever. The fantasy that they existed outside ordinary human selfishness. The fantasy that they belonged, in some impossible emotional sense, to the audience.

And perhaps most painfully: the fantasy that one day the emotional need underneath all this longing might finally be recognised and answered. That is the apology we never get. Not from the influencer. From the parent.

The emotionally absent father who never learned tenderness. The depressed mother who could not

consistently attune. The volatile caregiver whose affection arrived unpredictably. The parent who loved practically but not emotionally. The parent who stayed physically present while remaining psychologically unreachable.

Many adults spend their lives unconsciously searching for a corrected version of that relationship, someone who feels attentive without becoming dangerous, available without becoming rejecting.

Creators slide seamlessly into this role because they are designed to appear emotionally legible. Their content is intimate enough to trigger attachment, but controlled enough to avoid genuine relational rupture.

Even their scandals follow familiar psychological patterns. When influencers disappoint audiences, reactions are often wildly disproportionate because audiences are not responding merely as consumers. They are responding as wounded attachment systems.

The betrayal feels personal because psychologically, it is personal. The creator was never just a creator. They were playing a symbolic role inside the follower's emotional life.

This does not make fans stupid. It makes them human. In fact, one could argue that parasocial attachment is not evidence of society becoming less emotionally sophisticated, but more emotionally revealing. The internet has simply exposed how profoundly hungry many people are for attunement.

We live in an age of chronic loneliness disguised as hyperconnection. Families fracture geographically. Communities dissolve. Religion loses influence. Romantic relationships become increasingly unstable. Friendships are squeezed by work, burnout and algorithmic distraction.

Into that vacuum steps the influencer: endlessly available, infinitely soothing, always one tap away. Of course people attach. The real question is not why parasocial relationships exist, but why so many real-world relationships fail to provide what people are desperately seeking online.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of all this is that parasocial bonds often protect people from the very thing they actually need.

Real intimacy. Mutual intimacy is messy. It demands vulnerability without guarantees. It requires tolerating misunderstanding, conflict, disappoint-

ment and ambiguity. Genuine love cannot be algorithmically optimised into perpetual emotional reassurance.

A creator can upload daily affirmations forever. But they cannot truly know the person watching. They cannot offer the terrifying, transformative experience of being fully seen by another flawed human being and remaining loved anyway.

And yet for many people, the fantasy still feels safer. Because fantasy cannot abandon you in the same way reality once did. Or at least, that is what the nervous system hopes.

Still, the illusion always cracks eventually. The creator changes. Stops uploading. Gets exposed. Burns out. Moves on. Falls in love. Ages. Evolves. Becomes unreachable. The audience discovers what children eventually discover too: the perfect attentive figure does not exist.

Not online. Not anywhere. The ache underneath parasocial obsession is ultimately not about influencers at all. It is about mourning the care we needed before we even had language for needing it.

And perhaps that is why these relationships feel so emotionally enormous despite being technically imaginary. Because the longing underneath them was always real.

The parasocial trap

Virginia Robertson

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When digital content creators replace real-world confidants

The parasocial TRAP

Virginia Robertson is a dedicated academic and human rights activist whose work bridges the gap between scholarly research and grassroots advocacy to advance social justice. Now in her early 50s, she continues to be a powerful voice for marginalized communities, combining decades of field experience with rigorous intellectual inquiry to drive meaningful policy reform.

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